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Pedestrian improvements to Second Avenue unveiled

Seniors say they can more safely cross Silver Spring street

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

One nice day in late 2007, during a break from her driver's education class at Holy Cross Senior Resource Center on Second Avenue in Silver Spring, Sheila Cogan briefly stepped out the front entrance of the building to watch the community's activity.

That day, "I observed enough accidents almost happen that I was stunned," said Cogan, a Silver Spring resident.

An elderly man dropped off his disabled wife at the resource center and was nearly hit by a bus leaving the bus station on Second Avenue. Nearby, a man in a wheelchair was crossing the intersection of Cameron Street and Second, but when he reached the intersection, the unkempt shrubs obscured him from drivers. Cogan could hear him shout, "Nobody can see me!"

Cogan immediately walked into the resource center and dialed every county official she could find.

Eighteen months later, many of those county officials, including County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring, stood on Second Avenue on March 26 to present recently completed pedestrian safety improvements on the busy Silver Spring street, to the raves of many senior residents.

"I didn't want to be bumped to the next ZIP code because of drivers who refuse to stop at crosswalks," said Victoria Price, a resident of the nearby Charter House on Fenwick Lane.

Some of the 14 improvements made to Second Avenue include relocated bus stops, wider crosswalks and sidewalks and an audible crossing signal for blind pedestrians at Second and Fenwick that announces when it is OK to cross.

The improvements are paid for in part by Leggett's Pedestrian Safety Initiative that launched last year. Leggett allocated a \$4 million increase for pedestrian safety in this year's proposed budget.

"There are too many deaths, too many people are dying," Leggett said of the increased focus on pedestrian safety. The county averaged 14 pedestrian deaths per year between 2003 and 2006, and 17 in 2007.

Cogan calls her efforts "a model" for other concerned residents who want to effect change within the county government but don't think elected officials are listening. A few months after making her initial discovery of the dangers along Second Avenue, she organized a meeting in the Holy Cross Senior Resource Center conference room with county officials.

Using a Google Map she designed with various icons, Cogan outlined 14 risks to pedestrians and seniors along Second Avenue. The main problems included crossing signals that didn't give seniors enough time, unsafe medians and bus stops too close to crosswalks and building entrances.

"Before, you would just hope you were going to make it across," said Susan Boaz, a blind Silver Spring resident who praised the audible crossing signal that tells her when to cross at Second and Fenwick.

Besides Cogan's complaints, the area was targeted because of the close proximity of the Senior Resource Center, residential buildings like the Elizabeth House and Charter House, which both have a high concentration of seniors, and the Silver Spring Metro station, Ervin said.

"There are a lot of disabled seniors who are terrified of crossing the streets here," Ervin said.

The improvements meet the same goals as other county efforts, including Leggett's Senior Transportation Initiative. As part of that, the Route 18 Ride On bus will be rerouted this month to stop at Charter House and Elizabeth House. Pedestrian countdown signals near the Riderwood retirement community and increased visibility of street signs along Arcola Avenue in Wheaton already have been installed.

Other pedestrian initiative projects include improvements already made to Piney Branch Road near Flower Avenue, a "road safety audit" under way along Georgia Avenue between Spring Street and Sligo Avenue and a future study of Colesville Road between East West Highway and Spring Street.